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ABSTRACT

Situated between academic discourse and that kind of personal writing that is only for the writer herself, autobiographical writing could serve as a middle ground in which first-year college writers render and describe personal experiences yet at the same time explain and analyze them. In "Lives on the Boundary," Mike Rose offers some examples of this particular type of autobiographical writing. Recalling his minority experience in college, for instance, Rose reflects on his struggle with academic discourse and generalizes from his learning experiences a view of learning process that is to influence his teaching later in life. By doing so, Rose provides a larger context in which his personal struggle becomes part of the struggle of all those who are outsiders of the academic world. Such writing indicates an author's ability to make sense of his or her own experiences and to understand their significance to him- or herself and to others, an ability that is indispensable in producing good academic writing and an ability that is often underdeveloped in first-year college writers. According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1990), without "an evaluative context" for experiences to be apprehended there will be no experiences. If scholars agree that a "strong," "organized," "differentiated," "collective," and a "vivid" and "complex" inner world are desirable, then autobiographical writing may be a legitimate discourse for first-year writers. (TB)

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Xin Liu Gale

Personal Experience and Academic Discourse: Teaching Writing Through Autobiography

ED 372 393

The debate between social constructionists and expressivists over what should be the goal of first-year English courses and how writing should be taught to first-year college students puts teachers of writing in an uncomfortable position in the writing classroom. This uncomfortableness is vividly described by Carole Deletiner in a recent College English article, "Crossing Lines": While she was able to turn those reluctant students into willing writers by encouraging them to write and communicate about their personal experiences and feelings, especially the pain and suffering they have experienced, she nonetheless feels guilty and has to lie to her colleagues that she is teaching "the form of essay, the introduction, the developing paragraphs in which we supply supporting details, and of course, how to write a conclusion." When Deletiner remarks, after telling the lie, "I feel like a traitor to everything I believe in," she seems to suggest that she believes, at least in principle, that she should teach academic discourse instead of encouraging personal writing, even though she knows that it works better to treat students as people and fellow writers with whom she can share her own experineces and feelings.

Those of us who have taught first-year English perhaps have experienced similar anxiety Deletiner has confessed. We agree with Bruffee that "Mastery of a knowledge community's normal discourse is the basic qualification for acceptance into that community" (643). We also agree with Bizzell that if students

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want to participate in the academic community they must master academic discourse. Yet, on the other hand, we cannot deny that Peter Elbow's sentiment appeals to us when he makes an honest statement like this:

> I love what's in academic discourse: learning, intelligence, sophistication--even mere facts and naked summaries of articles and books; I love reasoning, inference, and evidence; I love theory. But I hate academic discourse. ("Reflections on Academic Discourse" 135)

Elbow appeals to us because we know that many of our students share with him a hatred for academic discourse, and because we also know that, unfortunately, most of them do not share with Elbow the love for "mere facts and naked summaries of articles and books" or "reasoning, inference, and evidence" or theory. While Elbow can handle his love-hate feeling for academic discourse and reflect in his writing all the qualities that he loves in academic discourse, most of our first-year students have only their hatred for academic discourse at their disposal. So, for those of us who teach first-year English, the question is, how can we make our students love what is <u>in</u> academic discourse without having to teach academic discourse? Put another way, how can we get around academic discourse in our teaching but still teach what is in academic discourse?

Deletiner offers personal writing as the answer, an answer that has caused not only her own guilt but also criticism from her colleagues. (see <u>College English</u> 55.6 1993, comments by Cheryl Alton and Kathleen Pfeiffer). The early Elbow recommends private writing as the preferable alternative, that is, writing

directed to no real audience but for the sake of self ("Closing My Eyes" 60). The later Elbow resolves that he should devote plenty of time to the intellectual practices of academic discourse--namely, clarifying claims and giving reasons and so forth--but also work on nonacademic practices and tasks, including "autobiographical stories, moments, sketches--perhaps even a piece of fiction or poetry now and again" ("Reflections on Academic Discourse" 137). However, Elbow does not specify how he can accomplish these two seemingly incompatible tasks in the first-year English class. Taking the later Elbow's solution as the point of departure, I propose to use autobiography as a means to help smooth students' transition from personal or nonacademic writing to academic writing, and I will discuss why.

Whereas Elbow's "autobiographical stories, moments, sketches" are "nonacademic discourse" that "tries to render experience rather than explain it"(136), the autobiography I recommend covers not only the genre of autobiography but also autobiographical writing that both renders and explains personal experiences. However, this does not mean that the "autobiographical writing" I have in mind is the same as Donald Murray's "autobiographical writing," which, in his claim that "All writing is autobiographical," becomes a cover term for all kinds of writing--personal, reflective narrative, fiction, nonfiction, and academic writing (654). Between Elbow's "autobiographical stories" and Donald Murray's "autobiographical writing" the autobiography I refer to occupies a middle ground, a

mixture of stories about personal experiences and reflections on the meaning of personal experiences and feelings. Perhaps some passages from Lives On the Boundary by Mike Rose will help illustrate my point. For example, we find the rendering of personal experiences in the book, like the following passage that describes his struggle as a minority student in college:

> I was struggling to express increasingly complex ideas, and I couldn't get the language straight: Words, as in my second sentence on tragedy, piled up like cars in a serial wreck. I was encountering a new language--the language of the academy--and was trying to find my way around in it. (54)

But Rose is not satisfied with only telling the story. After presenting several strange sentences he produced at the time, he explains:

> Pop grammarians and unhappy English teachers get a little strange around sentences like these. But such sentences can be seen as marking a stage in linguistic growth. Appropriating a style and making it your own is difficult, and you'll miss the mark a thousand times along the way. The botched performances, though, are part of it all, and developing writers will grow through them if they are able to write for people who care about language, people who are willing to sit with them and help them as they struggle to write about difficult things. That is what Ted Erlandson did for me. (54)

In the second passage, Rose reflects on his struggle with academic discourse and generalizes from his learning experiences a view of the learning process that is to influence his teaching later in life. By doing so, Rose provides a larger context in which his personal struggle becomes part of the struggle of all those who are outsiders of the academic world. Explanations like this would perhaps be disapproved by Elbow, who is more concerned

with rendering and mirroring experiences than with reflecting and explaining them in autobiographical stories. As I see it, however, explanations and reflections of this kind are exactly what we should encourage students to develop in their autobiographical writing, because they indicate an author's ability to make sense of his or her own experiences and to understand their significance to him- or herself and to others, an ability that is indispensible in producing good academic writing and an ability that we often find underdeveloped in first-year college writers.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, without an "evaluative context" for experiences to be apprehended there will be no experiences (87). If students can only tell stories about their personal experiences without being able to explain what these experiences mean to them and to others, the experiences they write about are only the "random and non-structured" "I-experience" in the Bakhtinian sense. (Note: In fact, much criticism of expressivism is directed towards its emphasis of "private writing" as "writing for exorcism" to "get rid of thoughts or feelings"--a kind of writing that seems to encourage students to ignore the social context which shapes their personal experiences and feelings.) In the above-cited passages from Lives on the Boundary, only when Mike Rose has created a larger context in which he can evaluate his experience of grappling with academic discourse does his experience become the "linguistically and ideologically differentiated" "we-experience" (Bakhtin 88),

reflecting an immigrant community's struggle in the American educational system. Entering the "we-experience" is important, for, as Bakhtin points out, "The stronger, the more organized, the more differentiated the collective in which an individual orients himself, the more vivid and complex his inner world will be" (934). If we agree that a "strong," "organized," "differentiated" "collective" and a "vivid" and "complex" "inner world" are desirable and that they have something in common with learning, intelligence, sophistication, reasoning, inference, evidence--things that not only Elbow but we all admire in academic discourse, then it is not difficult to see why autobiographical writing serves as an appropriate transition from personal writing to academic discourse.

To conclude, I have proposed that we encourage students to expand their personal writing into autobiographical writing by persistently urging them to provide an "evaluative context" in which they can comprehend and communicate the significance of their personal experiences. Through encouraging students to reflect on and explain the meaning of their experiences, we lead them to see not only how their experiences are related to others' experiences but also help develop in them an ability to inquire, reason, analyze, and generalize or theorize. In the end, all roads lead to Rome--academic discourse can be learned through personal and autobiographical writing, with only a little push from the teacher who never tires of asking the student: Why did you choose to write about this experience? How did this

experience change your perception of yourself and the people around you? What did you learn from this experience? How did other people respond to your experience? How has the experience changed your life? and so on and so forth. Perhaps we can even forget for a while the theoretical quarrel between expressivists and social constructionists and adopt an approach that will soften students' resistance against academic discourse and reveal to them the charm of it.

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